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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the controversy over the status and objectives of the social studies and suggests ways in which educators can resolve the controversy. In addition, it offers critical comments on several recent overviews of the field of social studies, including the "SPAN Report," by Irving Morrissett, Sharryl Hawke, and Douglas Superka, and "Defining the Social Studies," by Robert Barr, James Barth, and Sam Shermis. The major groups holding conflicting views which have to such a large degree fragmented the field of social studies are identified as advocates of back-to-basics, the psuedo-social science specialists, and the single-minded humanists. Arguments advanced by the first group recommend that schooling consist mainly of the basic subjects such as reading, writing, and arithmetic; the second group favors a heavy concentration of courses in history, geography, and civics/government; and people believing in the humanistic approach advocate basing the social studies curriculum on the humanities without proper regard for the social sciences. The conclusion is that the field of social studies will be improved if educators concentrate on a professional study of the foundations of social studies. The implication is that social studies would benefit if educators and, in particular, people who write about improving the field of social studies, would take the history of social studies into account and, specifically, if they would realize that social studies is a distinct field built on a tradition that borrows fully from social sciences and humanities. (DB)

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Preparing for the New Onslaught on Social Studies

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"Oh people look around you!
The signs are everywhere, . . ."[1]

by
Murry Nelson and H. Wells Singleton

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The poet-troubadour who wrote the above lines doesn't know social studies from my great Aunt Sadie, but his admonition is auspicious indeed for those of us in social studies. It seems that we're getting an opportunity this time around to fix the cracks in the dyke that prevents social studies from being inundated with undue criticism and ultimately drowned in a sea of simplistic pedagogy. In the last ten years many of these onslaughts arose seemingly spontaneously and we fought valiantly just to hold our ground. Progress was impossible, if not unthinkable. The Skirmishes over MACOS and the Holt Social Studies program have erupted into what may be battle grounds of greater magnitude with the concept of social studies hanging in the balance. This concept, I would argue, is agreed upon to a greater degree than we might immediately believe, as Barr, Barth and Shermis have noted.[2]

Before we dig in for another round, a more accurate identification of these threatening forces should be offered since, in some cases, it is our colleagues who threaten us as much as our adversaries. We should clarify, however, that we are not making such statements with the idea of fragmenting further the field of social studies. At this point we need to close ranks around something we believe in. That is not a new message and it has recently been offered by the authors of the "SPAN Report" which we shall deal with below. What is new is the realization that we must rally around our past, our foundations, in order to insure our future. That, to many "modern

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educators" will be tough to swallow considering the great lengths they've gone to to promote the future of social studies. Our contention, however, is that our only hope of some degree of permanent "salvation" is to mandate professional study of the foundations of social studies. We will return to that conclusion and develop it below after first examining the signs of stress on our current social studies status.

The various camps that threaten social studies as we know it include the basics folks, the pseudo-social science specialists and the single-minded humanists. Immediately, our name calling endangers the foreign relations that we've had with these camps over the years, but we feel that some initial animosities are inevitable, considering what is at stake. We are fighting not for our lives (oh sweet martyrs) but for the life of the school as we know it or <u>want</u> to know it, and possibly (being a bit overdramatic) our society as we want it to be.

The first two groups at times may offer similar arguments. The basics folks in their most galvanized state think that schooling should be the three R's with a possible dose of history and geography. The SPAN authors note this syndrome with their reference to the 1979 Gallup Poll in which "the public rated two social studies courses--civics/government and United States history--among the top four essential subjects'" (Morrissett, Hawke, and Superka 1980, p. 566).

Morrissett, et al. then go to repeat the distressing "finding" of the NSF Survey that (Morrissett, et al. p. 566):

> Substantially less teaching time is spent on social studies than on reading or mathematics in the elementary grades, particularly in grades K-3. Informal reports indicate that in some districts elementary social studies programs are fighting for their very existence.

If we accept the notion that textbooks equals a program, then this contention might be valid. We feel, however, that in no grade levels is social studies conceptually so secure, as the primary grades. The socialization, politicalization and acculturation functions of that grade level are not only apparent but inevitable. Our task is to make that more fully known and understood so that the vital teachings of social studies are not performed in such a haphazard manner.

The Project SPAN Report seemed a promising beginning for vanquishing the "forces of simplistic basics," but despite our hopes, they have not been realized. They have supported our notion, however, that attacks are growing and some of the supportive rationale from Project SPAN is quite useful. It is noted, for example, that (Morrissett, et al. p. 564):

> The curriculum has been assailed over the years, particularly during the past ten years, by many disparate, single-focus attempts to make the curriculum more "relevant"--for example, those involving multicultural education, legal education and values education.

Rather than broadening the base of social studies these have ultimately led to a shrinking of that conceptual base because, as the Project SPAN Report notes, educators returned to what they felt more comfortable with and this was an even more traditional curriculum than that which existed before the introduction of these "new fields."

The tradition that was returned to however was warped and that has continually led to subsequent dissatisfaction (Nelson, 1980, p.).

The SPAN Report does not offer the saving grace possibly faced with these facts. Instead these authors turn away from the direction of foundational support and set off on what they consider a new path. As Engle, Patrick and Shaver note, the path has been trod many times.

Professor Engle wisely notes that:

> The idea of basing curriculum on immediate child interest and need is not a new idea. It has been with us for most of this century . . .
>
> The need in the social studies is for basic reform . . . Let us not confuse the need for such a study with superficial patching and manipulation of existing practice (Engle, p. 588).

Professor Shaver finds the whole report regressive and evidence of the ahistoricism Nelsonclaims permeates the field of social studies (Shaver, p. 591).

More than anything else, we feel, and Professors Engle, Patrick and Shaver seem to agree, that the greatest shortcoming of the Project SPAN Report is its continuing ignorance of the history of social studies. Despite consultant reports by Hazel Hertzberg and James Lengel that deal with that issue, it seems not to have been seriously considered by Morrissett, et al.

The hard-line basic folks often meld into the Basic Educationists in the tradition of Arthur Bester and, more recently James Koerner. These more erudite basic educators would return us all to those "thrilling days of yesteryear" when history was history, civics was civics and geography, geography. There was none of this social studies nonsense. Having battled this out from 1916 to 1930 (at least), it seemed that social studies had been accepted, but that is just not so. The 1960's saw the attempted broadening of other social sciences in social studies, but the ultimate affect has been, as noted above, to solidify history and geography.

The sixty-year old battle smolders on. Paul Schumann's recent suggestion that "History and Geography should be Scrapped" (Schumann, 1980, p. 342 and 364) was indicative of the frustration social studies educators feel, and written

in the tradition of Harold Rugg's provocative (and at times less than serious) suggestions concerning the social studies. Schumann prompted a rejoinder by R. J. Simms-Brown (1980) that accurately noted that history and geography are not at fault, as it were, but rather the eroneous manner in which they have been taught.

Our own National Council has recently exacerbated the situation, we feel, through the best of intentions. The October 1980 Social Education emphasized the "Teaching of American History." To be sure some of the focus of this section reflected the broad view of American history that the founders of the NCSS hoped to see perpetuated, but this view (particularly well presented in Shenton and Jakoubek's article) is weakened by a wholly inadequate direction offered by Branson and Toppin. Both fail to establish history as a living breathing part of the social studies. It is here that our forces collide as they did in the 1920's. Social studies is more than the social sciences compressed. As Barr, Barth and Shermis have noted, the most important function is simply developing good citizens. A recent study that one of the co-authors undertook reinforces that view. In every elementary social studies methods text examined, the author(s) stated that the function of social studies was to develop good citizens. And as Barr et al. have noted the social sciences provide a vehicle for progressing in that manner. The humanities, too, are a part of the social studies, but the recent report, The Humanities in American Life, funded by the Rockefeller Foundation threatens to possibly harm social studies more than help it. The report's attacks on "back-to-basics" and cries for more access to the humanities leaves social studies where it should be, between the two camps. The threat is that in trying to please both groups, we please neither and become further beseiged.

Our defense is not in initial counter attack but in buttressing what we stand for, as Engle noted. That comes from reading and understanding these fundamental arguments as dealt with by the Ruggs, Tryon, Johnson, Gambrill, Hanna, Wesley et al. We must teach our professional teachers of the foundations of our field--social studies. We are not history, nor are we critical thinking. The realization that social studies is a distinct field built on a tradition that borrows fully from social sciences and humanities must be promoted and ultimately accepted. We cannot have 60 more years of cyclical arguments.

Notes

[1]Browne, Jackson, "Rock Me on the Water" ASCAP, 1972.

[2]Barr, Robert; James Barth and Sam Shermis, Defining the Social Studies, NCSS, Washington, D.C., 1977.

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